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ABSTRACT

To examine working-class women's attitudes and perceptions about the Women's Movement, a study reviewed 14 collections of interviews with low-income women conducted in the 1970s. Interviews were collected from a variety of sources--academic studies, books written for the general reader, and a large-scale study commissioned by a publisher of working-class women's magazines. The women interviewed were lower-middle- or working-class with grade school or high school educations, who held jobs as clerical workers, saleswomen, waitresses, beauticians, factory workers, or unskilled laborers such as laundry workers. Results revealed that most working-class women received the majority of their initial information about the Women's Movement from the mass media, especially television. Two influential oral channels of information--conversations with family and friends, and direct contact with feminists--reinforced information gained from the media. Analysis showed that this information was generally disseminated through a male value system, which trivialized or ignored feminist issues. Most attitudes expressed toward different aspects of the Women's Movement were negative, including attitudes toward family relationships, equal pay for equal work, assertiveness in women, and traditionally feminine styles of dress and behavior. The issue of lesbianism--central in feminist circles--was rarely mentioned. Finally, analysis indicated that misunderstandings often arose because of differences in class values, as well as from distorted images received through the media. (Sixty-nine footnotes are appended.) (MM)

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FRAGMENTED SISTERHOOD: FORMATION OF PUBLIC OPINIONS ABOUT THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT BY WORKING-CLASS WOMEN IN THE 1970s

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FRAGMENTED SISTERHOOD: FORMATION OF PUBLIC OPINIONS ABOUT THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT BY WORKING-CLASS WOMEN IN THE 1970s

"I look for the Women's Movement, but where is it? I just find a void. There aren't any role models." The angry young woman was one of four on a February 1988 television panel that marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of The Feminist Mystique. Eleanor Holmes Norton, another panelist, sounded crisp as she reminded the younger woman, "The Women's Movement never settled anything once and for all. Each new generation of women must fight its own battles, while perserving the gains already made." [1]

The strongest element in the contemporary Women's Movement is the sense of sisterhood it has encouraged among women with diverse backgrounds and interests. Women need to fight their battles together, to assure that sisterhood really will continue to be powerful. While the generation gap is one barrier, some women do not consider themselves feminists because they believe their values conflict with what they understand to be feminist values. This has been a problem from the beginning of the contemporary Women's Movement, which began to stir around 1963 with the publication of Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique,[2] but became a strong and vital force in the late '60s. Many women recognized then that their struggles in relationships and jobs were not just their own personal failures, but were related to a cultural system whch kept them in their place. Anger at the patriarchal system was a natural reaction. For women who had felt the sudden insight

(known to feminists as "the click") that made them realize their oppression, it seemed unbelievable that all women would not have the same reaction to the feminist message.

It was especially hard for radical and socialist feminists to find that the working-class women with whose hard lives they identified often did not respond to their rhetoric about patriarchal oppression. When upper-middle-class feminists tried to communicate to women with class-based value systems that were quite different from theirs, they did not recognize that those deeply rooted differences might not be overcome just because of common womanhood.

The problem was made worse because much of the communication between early feminists and many other American women was not direct, but was mediated through various forms of mass media, where it filtered through a male-dominated perception of what the women in the Movement expressed.[3] Feminists who were constantly surrounded by Movement rhetoric did not realize that other women heard either garbled messages about the Women's Movement, or very few messages at all.

With the fervor of the newly converted, feminists in the early '70s believed that if the feminist message was heard, it would be accepted. The idea that all women are sisters was so strong in the early Women's Movement that it seemed unthinkable to question it by devising persuasive strategies to reach different groups of women. When feminists raged against the way relationships with men were culturally structured, against

traditional feminine styles of dress, for assertiveness in women, for sexual freedom in relationships and pregnancy, and for job equality, they used language and symbolic acts which antagonized working-class women who saw their own deeply held values scorned.

Diffusion of Innovation Model

Research on diffusion of innovation provides a model which can make clear why the early persuasive strategies of the feminists were not as convincing to working-class women as they were to middle-class women. First, the heterophily factor assured that the message would be more easily understood by those who were similar to readers of The Feminist Mystique, which was about "the problem which has no name" in the lives of middle-class women. The first change agents (those who were early proselytizers for a change in how women looked at their lives) came from a high social and economic position, even if they lived in voluntary poverty. Rogers notes: ". . . a consistent finding from past researches on the diffusion phase is that individuals' socioeconomic status is highly related to their degree of change agent contact, and that status (and change agent contact) are in turn highly related to their degree of innovativeness." [4]

The first innovators were not working-class women, and contact across class lines would have had to be sought intentionally. This did not happen as much in the early stages of the Women's Movement as it did later.

Second, since the main elements in the diffusion of new ideas are "an innovation which is communicated through certain channels

over time among the members of a social system,"[5] it may be that the channels through which the information went from the early change agents to the working-class members of the social system of women did not transmit the feminist message in a clear or convincing manner. However, Rogers says that diffusion research seldom implies that the source of innovation or the channel through which it is presented may be at fault if the innovation is not accepted, but that the late adopters of the innovation are more apt to be blamed. They may be said to be traditionally resistant to change, or simply irrational. This does describe what many exasperated feminists felt about women who resisted examining their lives from a feminist viewpoint.

Diffusion of an innovation, according to Rogers, is said to occur in five stages: (1) awareness or knowledge of the idea, which must usually occur through mass media channels if large numbers of people are to learn about it; (2) attitude formation or persuasion, when an individual or a group of individuals decide to have a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the idea; (3) decision, when the individual decides to try the idea in order to find out if she will reject or accept it; (4) implementation, when the idea is put into use, and (5) confirmation, which occurs when an individual definitely decides to accept or reject the innovation. The innovation is accepted first by innovators, then by early adopters, followed by an early majority, then a late majority, and finally by the laggards in a given social system.[6]

Using this model, one can see that the first stage, awareness

of feminist ideas, happened on a national scale through the mass media, but also through the word-of-mouth network which led to the formation of consciousness-raising groups. However, a woman had to be involved in that network in order to be in such a group, and the socioeconomic factors made it less likely that working-class women had such early contact. In the second stage, attitude formation, there is less reliance on media channels, and more reliance on person-to-person communication with one's peers. Communication among women across barriers of class, race, economic status, or education was more difficult than communication among women who were already similar to each other, and understanding of the innovative feminist ideas was diffused slowly, with many opportunities for misunderstanding to develop. Some working-class women might go on to try some new behavior before they accepted or rejected the ideas of feminism, but many women seem to have made up their minds much earlier, in stage one or two.

As information about the Women's Movement spread by word-of-mouth through consciousness-raising groups, through books and articles written by feminists, and through the mass media, most working-class women were not using the same communication channels as the feminist writers and speakers. They were not in the word-of-mouth network of conscious-raising groups. They did not read the books, nor the articles in scholarly and radical journals and Movement newsletters. They saw the image of feminism presented on television and in newspaper articles, but that did not result in a "click" for most of them.

In order to avoid repeating past mistakes as each generation of women decides which feminist ideas to accept or reject, one needs to ask four questions about what happened in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

1) Through which communication channels did working-class women receive their knowledge about the Women's Movement?

2) Was information on the Women's Movement which was disseminated through the mass media presented in a neutral way?

3) What attitudes about feminism did working-class women form as they moved into the second stage of the diffusion model, attitude formation?

4) Why did they accept or reject the feminist world-view?

Methodology

To find answers to these questions, 14 collections of interviews with low-income women done by others in the 1970s were reviewed. Some of these interviews were done for academic studies;[7] more were found in books written for the general reader.[8] Additional information came from a large-scale study of how working-class women reacted to the Women's Movement that was commissioned by MacFadden-Bartell Corporation (which publishes magazines aimed at the working-class woman), and conducted by Coup, Greene, and Gardner in 1973.[9]

Although all these women were interviewed on many subjects besides their attitudes towards the Women's Movement, in the interviews one can extrapolate their answers to this study's first, third, and fourth questions. Answers to the second

question about media fairness come from various studies about women and the media.

Who Were The Women?

The women who were interviewed were lower-middle or working-class, defined by four factors: (1) educational level of the woman (and of her husband, if she was married), (2) the woman's job, if any, (3) the husband's job, if she was married, and (4) total family income. Class has been defined traditionally in terms of a husband's position, which is usually related to his income and education level, and married women have been placed in their husband's class.[10] A single woman's class would be that of her father when she was young,[11] but as she grew older her own education, income level, and type of job would place her in the social structure. Although feminist scholars object strongly to a classification system that ties a woman's position to that of a male relative, it is difficult to do comparisons with previous work without using this system.[12]

The women had grade-school or high-school educations. They might have attended college for a year or two. If they were married, it was to men with similar educational backgrounds, who worked in blue-collar jobs, in small businesses, or in factories. The men might have a trade, such as a plumber or a logger, or they might own or work on a family-sized farm. The women, whether single or married, were clerical workers, saleswomen, waitresses, beauticians, factory workers, or unskilled laborers, such as laundry workers. A few worked in non-traditional blue-collar

women's jobs.

Women in traditional women's jobs do not make much money; a single woman's income would be low. The median yearly income of all women who worked full time in May 1974 was $6,448.[13] Median family income for blue-collar families in 1976, using the income of the "principal income recipient" only, was $15,796.[14] The blue-collar families whose women were interviewed might make a combined income from a low of $5,000 to a high of $20,000, with most between $11,000 and $14,000 a year. A general income figure cannot be given on a national scale; an income which will support a family comfortably in a small town in Ohio may be totally inadequate in a large city such as San Francisco.[15]

Education, income, and type of work must be looked at together in assessing anyone's class position, since any one of these can change a person's level. But deeply held values from one's class of origin do not disappear with a raise in salary or a different job, and values may be more important than income level in determining the class with which a person identifies.[16] For example, the strong emphasis placed on keeping the family together in the working class ran counter to the feminist emphasis on freedom from constant nurturing at the expense of a woman's own emotional life. The militant lesbian faction in the Women's Movement probably was not acceptable to many working-class women, although this was a topic they greeted with a silence that simply refused to acknowledge its existence. For many reasons such as these, the working-class women who were interviewed often did not

respond favorably to what they had heard about the Women's Movement in the early 1970s.

Through what communication channels did working-class women receive their knowledge about the Women's Movement?

According to what was said in the interviews, most of the working-class women did get the majority of their intitial information about the Women's Movement from the mass media, especially television. Research into the media habits of the blue-collar worker or the working-class person often has looked at male behavior and assumed that female behavior was the same.[17] These inteviews with low-income women themselves provided information with more depth and intensity about how the media affected their thinking.

All of their information about the Movement did not come through the media, however. There was evidence in many of the interviews that two influential oral channels of information reinforced the information gained from the media. The first oral channel was conversation with family and friends, in which traditional values were passed from one generation to the next. The second was direct contact with feminists who impressed individual women with what they said and did. Working-class women liked feminists whom they had met in person and with whom they had worked. They felt alienated from feminists such as Gloria Steinem about whom they had only heard through the media.[18]

Television

The major media channel for information about feminism was television, with magazines and newspapers ranking much lower, and books barely mentioned at all. Television was an important information channel for all the women who were interviewed. In Women and Mass Media, Butler and Paisley reported that women spent 31 hours a week watching television, compared with 25 hours a week for men. However, women who worked outside the home watched 27 percent less television than non-working women.[19] However, knowing how many hours of television are watched in a household during the week does not tell us much about the effect certain programs might have on the woman in that household. Television programming which re-inforced traditional sterotypes of women, while at the same time giving news of the Women's Movement a negative slant, would not help a working-class woman to form positive opinions about the Movement.

When Lillian Rubin interviewed the members of fifty blue-collar families for her study of working class life, she was struck by the way the television set dominated all the living rooms. "Indeed, as flowers turn toward the light, so everything in the room is turned expectantly toward the tube."[20] Rubin had a perceptive comment on the diversity of opinion among researchers about the impact of television on the working-class viewer.

> The argument about the impact of the mass media on blue collar workers is complex, contradictory, and largely unsatisfactory. . . .The issue may not be whether television or other mass media affect people's lives and perceptions.

> Of course they do. The question we must ask more precisely is: In what ways are Americans of any class touched and affected by their exposure to television? For the professional middle class, it may be an affirming experience; for the working class, a disconfirming one since there are no programs that deal with their problems, their prospects, and their values in sympathetic and respectful ways.[21]

It was not just television that failed to affirm working-class values. Research on blue-collar workers sometimes had a patronizing tone.[22] The researchers were academics, who believed that books were a better way to get information and that television was mostly intellectual mush. Daytime television, aimed specifically at women of all classes, was considered trivial by communication researchers, as Lillian Robinson pointed out in the introduction of her own study of it, Sex, Class, and Culture. Robinson not only studied soap operas, she actually enjoyed watching them, a habit that caused real shock among her colleagues!

Robinson found that identity as a female was highly important to the homemakers and salaried workers shown on daytime television drama. She pointed to TV women, such as "Gloria" of "All in the Family," who held low-prestige, low-paying jobs, which could not provide them with much identity. Housework was not considered real work. Therefore, it had to be their personal lives which gave such female TV characters an identity.[23] This paralleled the way the working-class interviewees regarded their jobs and their family lives. Those who worked outside the home did so because they had no choice, but most of them did not like their jobs, which made their family lives a more important element

in their lives.

The repeated bombardment of patronizing attitudes toward women who work in the home must have had a negative effect on the self-esteem of many working-class women for whom that part of their lives was of real importance. On commercial television they would never have seen the conversations of feminists who were discussing housework as essential labor for which women should be given credit in the economic system, for these discussions took place in feminist groups. Instead, a feminist heard on television would probably have emphasized that women should work outside the home, implying that any woman who was a full-time housewife was a fool.

Linda Busby, in her sex role research on the mass media, found the familiar expected results: Women as seen on television are sex-typed, are not autonomous, are male-dominated. Her data were based on 300 episodes of 15 serials watched in 1973. But she also reported a positive note:

> The woman of the daytime serial is above all a human being. She is liked and respected by her male acquaintances, not merely sought as a sexual object, as she is in prime-time television drama. She does not act solely as an adjunct to male activities and interests. She is a responsible member of a family structure, exercising judgement and offering support to parents and children alike. Her opinions are solicited and acted upon. She enjoys the friendship of other women. . . . Of all the dramatic characters seen on television, she may be the most worthy of emulation.[24]

Although a working-class woman who watched daytime TV might not identify such characters as feminist, she was watching women who had feminist characterisics of self-assertion and

identification with other women. The difficulty is that such a woman on television would probably be given the lines, "I'm not a woman's libber. . . ," and would never have been identified as a feminist, so while the feminist concepts might have reached the television viewer, they would not make the Movement seem any less alien to her.

Noreen Janus pointed out that television legitimizes inferior status for women by reinforcing what she called "female consciousness," which leads women to define themselves first as wives and mothers, and, if they must work, to take jobs which leave them time for their family obligations. If they are unmarried, they believe the job should give them a chance to meet men. Married or unmarried, they should have an opportunity to dress well for the job.[25] None of this encourages a woman to take a job in which she wants to excel, be promoted, or make a lot of money. It also excludes the idea of a woman working in a traditionally male job, where she would have to strive for excellence and often would not be able to dress in a feminine way.

Changes in a culture come with glacial slowness; so what is seen on television in a given year is filed in the viewer's brain on top of many other years of television programming. For the working-class woman in the 1970s, there were no clearly labeled feminist role models on her television set, and her own work at home or on a job was looked down upon if it was shown at all. The information about the Women's Movement that she might have gotten from television news would have reported that many feminists in

that time also felt that women in traditional roles were second-class citizens who should break the bonds of family expectations. To further alienate a working-class woman from news of the Women's Movement, what she heard about it directly on television was filtered through male perception.

Was information on the Women's Movement which was disseminated through the mass media presented in a neutral way?

Gayle Tuchman, in her introduction to Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media, pointed out that what is seen on television is largely filtered through a male value system, even though there are women in the broadcasting industry. In the mid-70s, a study done by Muriel Cantor turned up only one public television program, "Woman," which considered issues raised by the Woman's Movement:

> According to the broadcasters whom Cantor interviewed, women's issues are not the most pressing of the day and do not compare in importance with questions about economic or political affairs. Rather, these spokespersons feel, women's issues are only the concern of a limited number of women identifying themselves as advocates of a special interest group. That women are 47 percent of the labor force--indicating that their problems are linked to economic issues--is ruled irrelevant by the broadcasters.[26]

Harvey Molotch agreed with Tuchman that women's news is filtered through male consciousness, which means that it is considered trivial in comparison to news that will interest men. He speculated on why news of the Women's Movement is either trivialized, or does not appear at all, in the media:

> Men have no need of information that may cause women to wish to abandon their traditional social roles altogether. Serious treatment of women's liberation has been difficult to come by in the media because of this lack of interest to men. . . .Thus, the coverage of women's liberation in the early years seems to have centered on the supposed burning of bras and the fear that women might, by abandoning cosmetics and delicate costuming, lose their femininity. . . . But the other issues of women's liberation were less prominent: the extent and implications of women's lower pay scales; the chronic and clear-cut (to women) discrimination in education, job, and credit access; the stereotyping by the media of women as trivial-minded, unreliable, and mercurial; and the invidious administration (or non-administration) of rape laws. My point is to show through illustration that the media report women's issues selectively and, apparently, through a man's sense of the world.[27]

The use of the term "bra-burner" by some of the women interviewed may be the result of mass media emphasis on that particular symbol. For example, many of the women Rubin interviewed used the term, and a woman interviewed by Seifer said, "But as far as what we saw on TV when the women's movement first came out, well some of that was ridiculous. The burning of bras and everything, to be equal to men."[28] Although it has been printed over and over that the bras were tossed into a trash can at Atlantic City and were not burned, the woman used the phrase as though she had seen it on a newscast. The symbolic meaning of this phrase is far more important than the fact that it never happened. In the minds of the women who used the phrase, it seemed to stand for the repudiation of traditional feminine dress, which was a core item on the feminist agenda.

Newspapers and Magazines

Television was certainly mentioned by the working-class

interviewees far more often than books, newspapers, or magazines. The working-class women interviewed for the SRI study (1973) said they watched television more often than they read magazines; most said that the television was on much of the day. However, 86 percent of all American households either bought a newspaper or read one which was picked up; the figure was 84 percent for households headed by an unskilled laborer.[29] The opportunity was there for a woman to read the paper. Data from the Target Group Index, in the late '70s, showed that only 17 percent of women and 18 percent of men with high school educations were frequent readers of magazines. General interest magazines such as Reader's Digest and Parade were mentioned most often.[30]

The idea that women's news is filtered through the male value system was as true for newspapers and magazines as it was for television in the '70s. No matter why a woman was newsworthy, she was trivialized by descriptions of her hair color, style of dress, and number of children.[31] News of the Women's Movement was stigmatized by editors as not of general interst, and usually placed in the special section of the paper with other news of interest to women--recipes, social events, weddings, and Dear Abby.

It was a sign of slowly changing times that many of these sections had been recently re-named "View" or "Living," to appeal to both sexes, but as Butler and Paisley remarked, "Despite newspapers' efforts to include topics of interest to both sexes [in renamed women's sections], few men read these sections."[32]

News about the Women's Movement that was printed in these sections was seldom a direct statement written by a feminist, but rather was a report on some action or speech which had been outrageous enough to catch the editor's eye. News about the Equal Rights Amendment was usually printed in the women's (or "View") section even though this legislation would have affected male jobs and working conditions as well as those of women. An editorial reflex seems to have placed anything dealing with women into that special section.[33]

The working-class woman had an opportunity to read a newspaper; she certainly read magazines, but not the ones for which feminists were writing. She read romance magazines, called "family behavior magazines" by their publishers. McFadden-Bartell Corporation sponsored several studies of what women read because they publish magazines aimed directly at working-class women. In 1955 such studies suggested that over 75 percent of the housewives who regularly read True Story were working-class.[34] In 1962, a McFadden-Bartell study show that a total of 13,325,000 women over 15 years of age had read one or more of the confession-type magazines published by McFadden-Bartell; 67 percent of those women were in households described as blue-collar.[35] In 1965, 394 working-class women, out of 501 women in a sample, said that they were regular readers of several magazines. True Confessions and True Story averaged higher readership than the other three named.[36] In the early '70s, women who were active in the Women's Movement wrote for their own newspapers and newsletters, or they

wrote articles for journals. Since the Women's Movement was not high on the media's national agenda, editors of romance magazines would not have welcomed stories with a feminist slant, anyway.

However, a content analysis of fiction in women's magazines showed one clear class distinction.[37] Magazines edited for women are divided by publishers into those aimed at middle-class women (McCalls, Ladies Home Journal, Good Housekeeping) and working-class women (Women's Day, Family Circle). Fifty-one percent of the stories in the middle-class magazines showed dependent females; the figure was 30 percent for working-class magazines. "Female ineffectuality" was desirable in 33 percent of the middle-class magazines. Tuchman believed that the editors thought their middle-class female readers were less likely to work for pay and would identify more with fictional characters who are like themselves, while working-class women could not afford to think of themselves as ineffectual.[38]

Both the fiction and the articles in both types of magazines stressed that a woman should marry and should not work outside the home, according to Tuchman. Women who did work outside the home, or who had volunteer responsibilities which sometimes took precedence over their families, were not represented at all in women's magazines during the 1950s-1970s, in the research summarized by Tuchman. She cited George Gerbner's theory that such absence meant symbolic annihilation of the group which was not represented--working women of all classes. In 1976, more than half of all women between the ages of eighteen and sixty-four were

in the labor force,[39] which meant that a large number of women did not see their lives reflected in the magazines they read.

Although Ms had started publication in 1971, its readership had few working-class women in it. In 1974-76, Ms had less than 5 percent of the readership that Family Circle did. Phillips noted:

> Ms itself reflects a minority cultural view, that of the upper middle class. . . . Family Circle, conversely, reflects the dominant culture in America today, that of the middle and lower middle class. . . .It can be inferred that homemaker-oriented magazines, like Family Circle, systematically glorify traditional values and female role models at a time when women's public roles are undergoing change; praise for the good wife and mother acts to reassure readers, to reaffirm their own moral values in the face of competing definitions of "reality."[40]

Television, which was aimed at a large mass audience of all classes, showed the working-class woman her image as an unimportant person doing low-prestige work as a service worker or unpaid homemaker, while the magazines which were targeted toward her showed her the same image but said that such a life was the best one for any woman. Although feminists in the early '70s were talking vigorously about the need for recognition of the value of women's unpaid labor in the national economic picture, there was as yet no corresponding feminist support for the housewife of any class who did such work. Feminists quoted in the media made it clear that paid employment was necessary for any woman's self-esteem.

The Oral Channels

The media provided only part of the information the working-class women needed to decide what their place in the world should be, but the two oral channels of communication mentioned

earlier gave the women conflicting views. In the first oral channel, women were told about values and social norms by older members of their families, and by their own friends. For example, the idea that the male is the sole necessary financial provider in a family is still as strong as it was 100 years ago, even though many working-class women have always held jobs that were essential for their families' financial well-being.[41] Sandy Hills, a supervisor interviewed by Wetherby at a Northwest lumber mill, said she worked to help her husband pay for a home, but her job was more responsible than his, in the same mill.[42] Why should a woman who has worked all her life speak as though her job is only temporary and her husband is the real provider for the family? As Berger and Luckmann have pointed out,[43] people act on what they believe reality is, and that particular belief has been handed down in American families for generations.

In a book which traced a family of working-class women through five generations, Hannah's Daughters, Dorothy Gallagher showed the first oral channel of communication passing on messages which made the daughters' lives much like the mothers', even though the world conditions were different in each generation. Similarities in these lives included multiple marriages, often to unstable, unskilled, and abusive men; early marriage age; a history of working, usually at unskilled work, all the women's lives; the struggle to provide for children who came early in their mothers' lives; and the isolation all the women seemed to have from what went on in the larger world around them.

All these women were literate. Hannah was a young woman in a time of economic depression (1893), the struggle for women's rights and the vote for women, and fierce union battles, some of them fought in the state of Washington where she lived. In reminiscing she never mentioned any of these. Hannah's great-great-grandaughter Liza was raised in the 1960s, but she showed no interest in what was happening to other people her age in that decade. Her language sounded old-fashioned to Gallagher, as though Liza were actually living in the 1950s, when she was interviewed in the early 1970s. If changing social mores in the nation had as much influence as family traditions, there should have been more difference in the lives of Hannah, May, Grace, Barbara, and Liza.[44]

However, there is some evidence from the interviews that a second oral channel, personal contact with feminists, can leave a favorable impression on working-class women. Several of the women interviewed by Seifer mentioned this. Cathy Tuley, a records clerk in a hospital who became an active union organizer, became interested in union work when she met Fay Eisenhower, who had been an activist in Berkeley community politics, the Women's Movement, the Peace and Freedom Party, and the Coalition of Labor Union Women and Union WAGE. Tuley was impressed with Eisenhower's commitment to the union and to the women she was trying to organize. Tuley expressed clearly her reservations about the feminists she had heard about in the media. "Before, what I knew about the Movment was really limited to just what I saw--people in

demonstrations and the type of women who were professionals and their side of things."[45]

Terry Dezso, a welfare mother with nine children, expressed positive feelings about the feminists she met through a Mothers' Group which included welfare mothers and faculty wife volunteers from the University of Connecticut. She said,"I just began to talk to these people and read magazines and think about things."[46]

Tuley and Dezso were in the minority of working-class women who had had an opportunity to get their knowledge of the Women's Movement first hand from practicing feminists. The majority of working-class women interviewed had received their knowledge about feminism from the biased mass media or from their own non-feminist family and friends. Thus their chances of developing an informed attitude toward the Women's Movement were slight.

What attitudes about feminism did working-class women form as they moved into the second stage of the diffusion model, attitude formation?

Attitudes toward different aspects of the Women's Movement were expressed by many of the working-class women in the interviews done with them by various interviewers. Most of these attitudes were negative. In the interviews, the women often talked about values of their own and then compared that to their own knowledge of a feminist value on that subject. Specific topics which were traced through the interviews were attitudes

toward family relationships, equal pay for equal work, assertiveness in women, traditionally feminine styles of dress and behavior, and lesbianism. Only one woman mentioned lesbianism, unfavorably, so there is no real indication in the interviews about how these women felt about a subject which was hotly debated within the Women's Movement. On the other four topics, strong opinions were expressed.

The single large-scale study of how working-class women reacted specifically to the Women's Movement was commissioned by McFadden-Bartell, and conducted by Social Research, Inc.;[47] its findings have been used in several discussions of the impact of social change on working-class women.[48] The 1973 study measured changes since a 1965 study done on a similar population by Social Research, Inc.[49]

Coup, Greene, and Gardner referred to the Women's Movement as "Women's Lib," which they defined as "the general label for the tide of change which is redefining women's role from that of a subordinate to the master race of men to that of the equal of men."[50] While the researchers thought that "Women's Lib" was a neutral phrase, it was not considered so by many feminists.[51] Its use casts doubt on how thoroughly the researchers understood what they were asking.

In October 1972, the interviewers gave questionnaires to 410 women in eight cities. Two-thirds were categorized by the researchers as working-class women; the middle-class women were questioned,". . . to help us pinpoint which working class traits

truly reflect working class characteristics and which more closely approximate characteristics of women generally in modern American life." [52]

Two questions produced answers upon which the researchers drew heavily in reaching conclusions about the womens' response to the Women's Movement. The first of these gave the respondent the statement, "Being a woman today means being. . . " followed by pairs of words such as "satisfied, dissatisfied," "foolish, sensible," "businesslike, charming." Respondents were asked to rate these on a six-point scale.[53]

The second question was asked two ways. First, the interviewer said, "We've been hearing a lot about Women's Lib the last few years, and now I'd like you to give me your impressions of it--from whatever you have heard and whatever you like or dislike about it." The instructions then read, "Probe for discussion of R's beliefs and feelings about Women's Lib." Following this, the statement, "Women's Lib reminds me of things that are. . ." was used again in the same format as the first question. Sample word pairs this time included: "mature, immature," "friendly, aggressive," "refined, vulgar," "frightening, funny."

Coup et al. found that working-class women had a stronger sense of being oppressed and victimized than did their middle-class sample, but that the working-class women did not believe that the Women's Movement helped them. They saw it as a contributor to the problem by putting pressure on them to have a

job,[54] when they had very little choice in that matter. They did have jobs, which they would have given up gladly if they could have afforded to stay home without making money. The working-class women resented what they considered to be the authoritarian attitude of leaders of the Women's Movement, none of whom were named in the report:

> . . . the authoritarian image is a serious impediment to a broader acceptance of the movement, for it is apt to bother women who are otherwise sympathetic and favorably attracted. Both middle class and working class women who see it favorably are offended by what they see as an attempt by Lib leaders to tell other women what they ought to do, feel, be proud of or ashamed of. It seems as though the leaders are trying to do what they have accused men of doing.[55]

Shocking language and prejudice against men were commonly cited examples of improper behavior on the part of the Women's Movement leaders.

Coup et al. found that four issues about "being a woman today" had a bearing on a woman's orientation toward the Women's Movement. These were self-esteem, power, achievement, and independence:

> The "highs" [on these issues] are pro-Lib and middle class and the "lows" are anti-Lib and working class. This is a further indication that working class women, on the average, are the least likely to possess the kinds of motivations which engender support for the Women's Liberation movement."[56]

It is important to note the limitations of this study and the biases of those who conducted it. Besides some odd choices for the paired words (for example,"businesslike, charming", which implied that these were polar opposites), the researchers described their respondents' characteristics in biased language.

For example, "Determined Self-Centeredness (planning life so that one's own security and well-being are assured)" is graphed under the heading "Negative Roles."[57] Nevertheless, the attitudes Coup et al. found toward the Women's Movement were found also by interviewers who talked with individual working-class women.[58]

These individual women were a varied group. One was the maid of a liberal feminist in a Northeastern city; another a Catholic homemaker who volunteered to help start an urban health clinic. There were cannery workers in Oregon, department store clerks in New York City, and housewives who volunteered in ethnic community organizations in Chicago. Several themes emerged as these women spoke to their interviewers about the Women's Movement.

They believed that a woman's role was to stay at home and rear children, although the overwhelming odds were that most of them worked outside their homes at repetitious, boring, and sometimes dangerous jobs. They regarded their husbands' jobs as of primary importance, and their own jobs as secondary to the vocation of homemaking, no matter how important their income was to their families.[59] Like the SRI working-class respondents, they complained about feminist pressure for women to hold jobs. These women did not gain as much self-esteem from their paid work as from their family relationships. They resented the feminist message that only through paid work could women become respected.

"Helen," a white maid in her 40s interviewed by Robert and Jane Coles, was a perceptive social observer who saw that the

relationship between her liberal feminist mistress and herself was a microcosm of relationships between middle- and working-class women. Helen's mistress wanted to work for pay instead of the volunteer work she did; Helen said that if she had money, she would "quit this job, and go home and stay home for a thousand years. My husband thinks she's crazy, and so do I." Helen mused on the fact that her own work was necessary for the liberation of her mistress, who then had time free for herself, but that the Movement had not done much for Helen. When the mistress did get a paid job, Helen was asked to work longer, and to stay overnight more often. She was paid more, but resented the time taken away from her own family.[60]

"Oppression" did not mean the same to a working-class woman as it did to the middle-class feminist; to the working-class woman, oppression was what the system did to both men and women, not just something men do to women. Working-class women saw men's role as harder than theirs, even when they worked outside the home, also. They thought a man deserved his rest after work, his noninvolvement in housework.[61] Angry feminist rhetoric that men should help with the household "shitwork" upset working-class women two ways: they objected to the language and to the criticism of men.

The feminist preoccupation with not being seen as a sex object was another point which led to misunderstanding. For many feminists in the early '70s, this meant that traditionally feminine clothing, including any form of skirt, was not worn. A

feminist wore a hair style she could care for by herself, and did not wear make-up. Working-class women lived in a culture in which such unorthodox dress would send an unpleasant message. As Mary McKenney put it, ". . . working class women frequently have to work harder to maintain an acceptable feminine image--a "liberated" working class woman may be considered a slut."[62]

One of the best jobs for a working-class woman was beautician. As one woman expressed it, "They don't understand how many of us go into beauty work just <u>because</u> we want to be independent. We can have a shop at home--be our own boss, be there when the kids come home from school, and keep ourselves together if the old man cuts out."[63] She said this to university professor Kay Hamod at a women's conference, as both women watched a consciousness-raising film that showed a negative view of permanents, wigs, and makeup. Another beautician told Lousie Kapp Howe, "You can't tell me it's bad for a woman to care about her appearance. I do, and I think I'm as liberated as anybody. . . ." 64

Assertiveness, a quality much praised by feminists, was not considered a virtue by many of the working-class women interviewed, though they rarely used that term, but rather described behavior they did <u>not</u> like. Kathleen McCourt's sample of white working-class women on the Southwest Side of Chicago was asked what qualities they most admired in themselves and in other women, and then what they disliked:

> Living harmoniously and getting along with other people is seen as one of the valuable qualities a woman can possess.

> Concomitantly, easily losing one's temper or otherwise being discordant is seen as a negative, though not uncommon, quality. . . . To be friendly, not to lose your temper, to like people--in short, to get along--is clearly a good quality for women in this community to possess. Nothing else is mentioned with anything approaching this frequency. . . .[65]

Many of the working-class women in San Francisco interviewed by Lillian Rubin said, "I don't know anything about it [the Women's Movement] and I don't want to know." Rubin noted that women who said individually that they were not happy with their lives were sure that they were the only woman who felt like this, and that they could not talk to their friends about their feelings. "Not to the friends I've got. They'd think I was one of those crazy women's libbers." The research for Rubin's book was done in the early 1970s, but the theme of, "I'm the only woman I know who's so unhappy," and the feeling of being alone in one's pain was typical of the middle-class women Betty Friedan interviewed in the late 1950s for The Feminine Mystique. Yet these women were not talking to each other, but were repeating the sterotyped phrases which they each thought everyone else believed.

Even if working-class women in the early 1970s could not agree with feminists about relationships with men, assertiveness, or dress, one might expect that the phrase, "Equal pay for equal work," would have the same meaning for women of all classes. Since many working-class women had low-paid, boring jobs, why did they not join with the early Women's Movement to demand employment equality with men? Three reasons emerged from the interviews.

First, equal employment opportunity is not an idea which suddenly sprang from nowhere about 1963. The idea has been part of working women's lives for over 100 years.[66] Low-income women have gone on strike and have asked for better wages and working conditions as long as there have been working women. These women did not see this as an issue which the Women's Movement could claim as its own, but as a separate issue with a long history of rebuffs.

Second, because of their more traditional sex role beliefs, there was a strong feeling that, given any problem with the number of jobs available, a man should always be given a job so that he can support his family. The hardship this works on a single woman was recognized, but the prevailing hope was that each woman would have a man, and thus that the policy of giving men preference for jobs was the best course for society as a whole.[67]

Third, many of the women simply did not believe that a woman could do a job as well as a man. Sometimes this was related to strength, but often women felt that men really were more clever and could be expected to do most jobs better than a woman could.

Why did these working-class women accept or reject the feminist world-view?

All these working-class women in the early 1970s had heard of the Women's Movement, but their reactions were more apt to be negative than positive. Part of this seemed to be based upon

cultural differences between the classes, but some of the problem came from the distorted picture of the Movement which the working-class woman received through the communication channels available to her at that time.

The differences in class values between early feminists and the majority of working-class women were profound. While family relationships might be just as draining on working-class women as on their middle-class sisters, the working-class women could not escape as easily to find satisfaction in education or a career. They had a very strong belief in the nuclear family which was not shaken by the extreme feminist anger which they saw expressed in the mass media.

The assertiveness which feminists championed in women seemed like bad manners to many working-class women. They could be assertive, too, but it was easier for them to do it in support of someone else, especially a family member, not for their own sakes. They had definite reservations about equal pay for equal work when it involved a young, unmarried woman getting paid the same wage as a hard-working husband with five children. Cheering the younger woman who has taken a non-traditional job is much easier if one is not struggling to support a family on too little money. Rather than apply for such work themselves, many of these women resented the women who did take "a man's job."

It was feminist rhetoric, which includes language, symbols, and behavior, which made the most negative impact on these working-class women. They might swear themselves, but not on

national television. The strong language with which feminists talked about their vision made some working-class women tune out the message in disgust. The mythical burning bras had a strong impact on the imagination of women, since the symbol stood for a radical change in the way women dressed. Bras and girdles and other constricting clothing, that had kept women in jobs where such clothing was appropriate, had been essential if one wanted to look like a lady. That had been something to strive for, but now working-class women heard that it was a sign of oppression.

Because media gatekeepers concentrated on the most extreme feminist rhetoric, working-class women had a distorted view of the Women's Movement. They did not see the real concern that many feminists had for all women, not just the ones who were similar to themselves.

Contact with feminists could have adverse effects, as it did in the case of Helen, the Boston maid who worked for an upper-middle-class feminist and was cynical about the discrepancies she saw between what her mistress said about equality and how she treated her maid. But contact could also have beneficial effects, as it did for Terry Dezso, Cathy Tuley, and several other women interviewed by Seifer and by Susan Jacoby.[68] Those working-class women who did appreciate feminist values were those who had benefited from the Movement's efforts to give women wider job opportunities, or who had worked with feminists in unions, political campaigns, or schools. Personal contact and practical results moved the working-class women to

favorable attitudes toward the Women's Movement.

Is this just history?

What all these women said about their views on feminism is still relevant in the '80s. Two recent collections of interviews with low-income women show that the effects of the Women's Movement have not touched their lives as effectively as the visionary feminists of the early Movement hoped.[69] Although the Women's Movement itself is more tolerant of diversity of opinion than it was in its beginning, the problems that low-income women had with the Movement agenda in the 1970s are still not well understood by more privileged women.

First, women who have been feminists for many years do not seem to know even now that not all women were in touch with the feminist network in the '70s. They are surprised, for example, that lesbianism was not mentioned more in the interviews done in the 1970s, because in the Movement it has always been a hotly debated topic. One cannot really interpret silence, but the lack of comment on lesbianism from the working-class women interviewed could mean that they had not heard the controversy, or that they had heard it and did not care to talk about it. Either way, their silence does not mean that they approved of it. The topic itself may have made those working-class women who were not lesbians feel alienated from the Movement.

Second, while the media channels are not as male-dominated as they were ten years ago, trivialization of women's concerns frequently happens in all media. Patricia Schroeder found it hard

to be taken seriously as a presidential candidate, even though she had credentials equal to those of any man in the race. Although there are more women in policy-making positions in the media than there were a few years ago, and national women's organizations receive better coverage in prime time and space, there is little feminist consciousness in media coverage of women's lives.

Third, for all the attempts that feminist organizations have made to reach out to women of diverse races, classes, and physical conditions, there is one group that still provokes anger in many feminists. That group is women who still do not have a feminist conscicusness, after all these years of hearing about the Movement. Many of these women come from the working class, but they would not be welcomed at feminist conferences. (Working-class feminists who do attend such conferences usually have a radical perspective which is not typical of the working-class women studied for this paper.) If women are to become a more effective force to fight for such rights as reproductive freedom of choice, comparable pay for comparable work, serious consideration for high political offices, and a national commitment to child care for working parents, then feminists need to reach out not just to those who quickly agree with them, but also to those women who have deeply felt reasons for being skeptical about the Women's Movement. A fragmented sisterhood will never go as far as one that is a strong mosaic of women who respect each other's differences, but can work together toward common goals.

Footnotes

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[5] Ibid, p. 35.

[6] Ibid, pp. 22, 106-107, 164.

[7] Ruth Sidel, Urban Survival: The World of Working-Class Women, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978); Lillian Rubin, Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working Class Family (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976); Kathleen McCourt, Working Class Women and Grass Roots Politics, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1977).

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11 Helena Znaniecki Lopata, Occupation Housewife (New York: University Press, 1971), p. 53.

12 Ann Oakley, Women's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present (New York: Random House, 1974); Acker.

13 U.S. Department of Labor, Employment Standards Administration, Women's Bureau, 1975 Handbook on Women Workers, p. 128.

14 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Money Income in 1976 of Families and Persons in the United States, p. 17.

15 see Rubin, p. 106

16 Mary McKenney, "Class Attitudes and Professionalism," Quest 3 (Spring 1977): pp. 49-57.

17 Tuchman et al., pp. 4-5; Arthur B. Shostak and William Gomberg, eds, Blue Collar World (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964): p. 50, pp. 416-428.

18 see Seifer, Nobody Speaks, pp. 247-248; Barbara Peters and Victoria Samuels, Dialogue on Diversity (Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity of the American Jewish Committee, 1976): p. 51.

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[25] Noreen Z. Janus, "Research on Sex-Roles in the Mass Media: Toward a Critical Approach," Insurgent Sociologist 7, 3 (Summer, 1977): p. 114.

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[28] Seifer, Nobody Speaks, p. 330.

[29] Bogart, in Shostak and Gomberg, p. 424.

[30] Butler and Paisley, p. 274.

[31] This has not improved much. Check the news stories on Patricia Schroeder when she considered becoming a presidental candidate in 1987.

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[34] Rainwater et al., Workingman's Wife, p. 126.

[35] Bogart, in Shostak and Gomberg, p. 427.

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Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge (Garden City,NY: Doubleday, 1967).

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[45] Seifer, Nobody Speaks, p. 248. Union WAGE (Women's Alliance to Gain Equality) was founded in 1971 at a NOW conference. It was the first group to demonstrate for extending protective labor laws to men, instead of taking them away from women.

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[47] Coup et al., 1973.

[48] see Marcia Millman and Rosabeth Moss Kanter, eds., Another Voice: Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1975); Bernard; Seifer, Nobody Speaks.

[49] The Working Class World: Identity, World View, Social Relations and Family Behavior Magazines (Chicago: Social Research, Inc., 1965).

[50] Coup et al., p. 2.

[51] see Robin Morgan, "Goodbye to All That," in Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, Rebirth of Feminism (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1971): pp. 273-274; Joan Cassell, A Group Called Women (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977): p. xi.

[52] Coup et al., p. 188.

[53] Ibid, Appendix II, "The Interview Guide," p. 5.

[54] Ibid, p. 49.

[55] Ibid, p. 103.

[56] Ibid, pp. 90-91.

[57] Ibid, p. 75.

[58] see notes [7] and [8] for titles of interview collections.

[59] see Lopata, p. 54, and Rubin, pp. 175-179.

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[62] McKenney, p. 53.

[63] Ruddick and Daniels, pp. 10-11.

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[65] McCourt, pp. 78-80.

[66] see Susan Estabrook Kennedy, If All We Did Was To Weep At at Home: A History of White Working-Class Women in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), and Barbara Wertheimer, We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

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